

# Surviving Hostage Taking Situations

Hostage taking situations can happen almost anywhere and anytime. It is something that all should be aware of and should be prepared for. The following guidelines are meant as a basic introduction.

1. Don't be a hero, accept your situation and be prepared to wait.
2. The first 15 to 45 minutes are the most dangerous. Follow instructions.
3. Don't speak unless spoken to, and then only when necessary.
4. Try to rest.
5. Don't make suggestions.
6. Escape? Should you or shouldn't you? THINK TWICE!
7. Advise on and request medication or aid if needed.
8. Be observant. You may be released and can help the authorities.
9. Be prepared to talk to the police on the telephone.
10. Don't be argumentative.
11. Treat the captor like royalty.
12. Be patient.
13. A black or red passport (diplomatic and official, respectively) may not bring you the best of privileges.
14. Get rid of items that could single you out as a person your captors may be fearful of.
15. If rescue comes, be prepared to HIT THE DECK.

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When the initial incident takes place, the hostages are in the gravest of danger. This is because the perpetrators are going through panic reaction, a high anxiety situation which is manifested by the "fight or flight" mechanism. If the hostages hesitate or offer ANY overt resistance, the perpetrators will try to demonstrate that they have the power. In order for a small number of terrorists to control a large number people the captors often engage in a quick violent act. They may beat someone, make a lot of noise or even kill someone indiscriminately. If there is no resistance, just a lot of noise may be sufficient.

These first few minutes are the most dangerous for all concerned. This includes the hostages, the responding or confronting authorities and even the perpetrator. In one instance, at Lod airport in Israel, in the frenzy of the takeover, one of the terrorists accidentally shot one of his cohorts. Do not make suggestions to perpetrator, if they go wrong he may perceive this as a trick on your part.

Once the perpetrator feels comparatively "safe" in his cocoon, he will start to relax. This sense of calm settling in will become apparent in the voices of the captors. Then, as we will discuss later, the stage is set for the "Stockholm syndrome" to develop. A situation where both the perpetrator and the victim develop an unusual concern for each other's safety

## Try to Rest

As absurd as this may sound to anyone "under the gun," it is a very important and useful guideline. The effects of panic after the initial seizure will wear both victims and captors down, psychologically and physiologically. With the constant raising and lowering of anxieties, all concerned can become exhausted. This may not pertain to the captors if they are "chemically supported", using drugs or other stimulants.

It is not surprising or uncommon for everyone to fall asleep, hostage and hostage-taker alike. This is especially possible in cases of a lone perpetrator, who must handle all stress and details himself. On many occasions, through the use of electronic listening and viewing devices, we were able to ascertain that everyone had in fact fallen asleep. Subsequent rescue and capture was then very easy.

## **Escape? Should You or Shouldn't You?**

This is a very complex question. Most assuredly, everyone has the right to try for personal survival. Self-preservation is a very powerful and primary driver. In certain instances, where an aircraft remains on the ground, or the hostage incident occurs in a building, people have successfully escaped their captors. In a bank incident in Queens, NY where police had infiltrated the basement, every time a hostage was permitted to visit the toilet located in the basement, they were spirited out of the building to freedom. This was accomplished without the perpetrators' awareness. During a hijacking in the Middle East, a few hostages were able to escape by the tail cone door and fell into the darkness and safety. On another hijacked airplane in the U.S. on the ground, while one hijacker was on the flight deck, his female cohort fell asleep and the flight attendants used an elevator to evacuate all the passengers.

It is, of course, a very subjective topic and one that requires careful consideration. In other escapes were caught by the hostage-takers and severely beaten. In the hijacking instances, of a Lufthansa aircraft that ended in Mogadishu, the perpetrators thought that the captain had tried to escape. This was not true, but nonetheless when he returned to the aircraft the hijackers shot and killed him. If the escape attempt is done with great bravado, the hostage takers may feel that they must demonstrate even greater control over their remaining victims. They may harm or kill them to make public their seriousness to retain control. Though some of these people may be strangers to you, on the other hand you may have friends or family left behind in captivity. While there are still hostages, play it low key and keep any plans for escape quiet. And if you are successful don't brag about your accomplishment until the incident is over for the remaining hostages. Attempting an escape is like attempting to broad jump a chasm. If you can jump 8 feet but the distance is 8 feet and 6 inches, you come close but you don't make it. Think about your opportunities and then rethink them again.

## **Be Observant**

Mentally take note of everything you see and hear. After the initial panic subsides, this mental exercise will assist you to cope. Try to memorize things such as 1. The number of perpetrators, their appearance and conversations, 2. The kinds and numbers of weapons carried, 3. The number of hostages and their identities or descriptions, 4. where you are being held, and if any routine has settled in, 5. the chain of command, and who is in charge.

On a train hijacking in Bellen, Holland by South Moluccan terrorists, a hostage, who was a journalist, successfully kept a written journal. This is not a suggested procedure, since it may make you "stand out". In a more recent hijacking, one of the victims had a hidden camera and took photographs. Great care and thought should go into this kind of action. If you are released

before the other hostages, your information will be invaluable to the other authorities in their tactical planning should a later rescue be necessary.

### **Don't Be Argumentative**

This pertains to your actions toward the captors, and even to other hostages. Our studies have shown that those individuals who "stand out" or are perceived as a threat, are often singled out by the captors. They may be treated violently, or even killed. Cooperate with your captors - do everything that you are directed to do, short of harming another person, without an argument. Treating the perpetrator like royalty refers to face him, make eye contact but do not stare, and when leaving his presence to another part of the room or location sort of back away. This maintains your position as a person.

### **Be Patient**

Be patient even though it may seem the authorities are doing nothing on your behalf. Most departments will be engaged in a complete program designed to bring you out of this crisis as safely and as quickly as possible. Remember that time is on your side. Everyone will get hungry and tired, and the hostage-taker's resolve to continue will diminish. The biological functions of all concerned will work in your favor. In many instances, hostages have been traded for food, drink- and/or toilet facilities. There have been some cases in which the captors have surrendered rather than face the indignity of going to the toilet in the presence of others. This would be less likely to happen in a prison environment, where there is generally less privacy, and the perpetrators would be accustomed to these conditions.

Sleep has brought many hostage incidents to a safe conclusion. Physiologically, the stress and anxiety of the situation bears heavily on captors and victims alike. It has not been uncommon for authorities to have to wake everyone up after gaining control of the situation. Some perpetrators have been quite surprised to be awakened, be placed in handcuffs, and several victims have been awakened to the news that "It's OK, it's all over." Sleep, from a psychological standpoint, is an acceptable way for the perpetrator to "surrender" without "losing face". Everyone can identify with being unable to stay awake, and the perpetrator's excuse goes like this: "After all, if I only could have stayed awake, they never would have captured me. I never surrendered."

### **Get rid of items that could single you out as a person your captors might be fearful of (police, military, religious or political groups).**

Persons with diplomatic passports or Law Enforcement Officers federal or local, active or retired should quickly get rid of their badges and credentials as surreptitiously as possible, even between the seats or in some other location. Many federal agents and police now place their credentials in their checked luggage. The carrying of other emblems, both military and religious, can also create problems. In the Middle East, the Marine Corps' eagle, globe and anchor is considered by many as a symbol of U.S. "aggression" against them, and those carrying that emblem or anything like it may be treated with greater harshness. Again in the Middle East, the wearing of a Star of David might also single the person out for specific treatment by certain terrorist organizations. In

a free and open society, these privileges are taken for granted, but for safety's sake, discretion may be the better part of valor.